

## 6

### Making Way for New Life



*Fall 1993–Late Winter 1994*

Garlic wafts through the air as I unload a heavy bag of books from my car. It's been a long day between working at the Short Center, where I teach art to adults with developmental disabilities, and night classes at the university. Thank God Tom has an updated view of gender roles in marriage or we'd be living on cereal and yogurt. He's made dinner again. It's easiest for him, working from home with volunteer hours covering the suicide crisis line, umpiring fall ball games on the weekends, and putting in time at his desk with his cancer research packets and short stories. Besides, he loves cooking and he's good at it.

Candlelight shows through the screened windows from the backyard. *I'm home.*

Tom hears me come in and calls: "I'm back here, come on out. Dinner's hot."

Joining him, I pour a generous glass of wine and melt into the chair, looking up to where he's pointing.

"Wow, I can actually see Orion's belt tonight!" he says.

Our nights of relaxed conversation from the hot tub of our Seaside home have been replaced by hurried outside dinners in the warm climate of Sacramento. There's always homework to be done and city lights to blow stargazing. We do our best to make special moments.

Tom twirls steaming pasta around a fork and bends in to feed me. The thudding of a distant helicopter builds sound momentum. I wait for it to veer off into another direction. It doesn't. In no time it's deafening, the way it chops the air and sucks it out of my ears. A searchlight streams over the neighbors' homes and then ours, stripping away any illusion of safety. I chase the pasta down with long swig of wine, hoping to counter

the sharp hit of adrenalin already pulsing through my body, and gather things off the table.

“Let’s go in. Looks like another bad guy is on the loose,” Tom says.

*Damn, just when it starts to feel safe in our little world.*

While we were back East for our wedding a few months ago, rats moved in and took over our kitchen and have been here ever since. They raid the fruit bowl nightly, being sure to steal at least one bite out of every piece. It’s starting to feel like a personal vendetta. We both take out our cancer-rage on the invaders and devised torturous ways to kill them. The bastards just keep coming back. I scream at them from the bedroom when I hear them rustling around at night. Anger is a little better than fear, anyway.

If it were only the rats, we might battle it out with them for another year, but there’s also the unnerving cacophony of domestic violence that breaks out every weekend, the woman across the street who was murdered with a frying pan, the violation of Tom’s truck being stolen and burnt to a charcoal skeleton and the auto accident in our front yard that ended with a car-jacking getaway. Let’s not forget the guy we heard moaning inside a chunk of metal way too small for a body to fit in after a train hit his car below the overpass we chose to take that day instead of a jog across the tracks. Nightmare material is abundant. Fear creeps in from the outside and merges with the scare that Tom’s symptoms give us when they pop up unexpectedly. Who knows which comes first: the fear or the symptoms. A vicious cycle of stress about being stressed is well underway.

Tom can’t afford such things and fights back with intense research into alternative medicines. Kombucha mushrooms multiply daily in giant pickle jars under the sink, while masses of pungent smelling sticks stew in a Chinese clay pot on the stove. Simultaneously, he nurses away the immediate stress with a little pot smoke before he gets caught up in the cycle. Instead of being relieved he isn’t shooting his immune system full of adrenalin, I come down sharply on his coping devices, partly because I’m not using my own.

“So that must be what—medical marijuana you’ve got going in there?” I shoot through the wall at him as the sage-like smoke drifts out to the living room where I’m stretching after a run. He walks out of the bedroom, eyes red, and sits down on the floor with me. All the sarcasm in the world isn’t going to get him to stop, I realize.

Finally he says, “If it works, it works. Look Jen, I could let the stress take me down first. Which is worse?” His reasoning stumps me. I want to buy in, badly. *Good point*, I think.

Just then, a car skids around the corner outside. It startles me, but Tom talks over it as if it were the refrigerator coming on: “Anyway, I’m quitting next month so I can train for the marathon. I’m finishing off my stash.”

*Hmmm, a quick fix. That works for now.* I’m desperate, I’m tired and I want to be on his team. “You want help depleting your stash?” I offer.

His face warms into a smooth smile, “Sure.” He gets his pipe and I pull off my sneakers and lay back, ready for relief.

And it comes. We are the old us again, with our bottomless bag o’ weed, swinging on the hammock in the hot evenings, talking of the stars and not cancer or the latest neighborhood crime. Weekend smokes quickly lead to weekday tokes and I’m back to

calculating when I can squeeze in a little reprieve amidst the heavy load of work and school.

Mid-November my cousin Theo calls and says he's got a two-hour layover in Sacramento. Coming clean can be postponed to a New Year's resolution because right now I've got a smokin' bud coming to town. I meet him at the bus station and set about picking up where we left off seven years earlier, when he lived with our family for a summer while his parents ironed out divorce details. I'd been home from art school and we worked together at a Pizza joint in the tourist haven of York Beach, Maine. Scott and I were on pause during his jail sentence for robbery. Meaning I was free to be a bad influence. After our shifts, Theo and I would drive around Nubble Light Point, smoke a joint and stop at Brown's for homemade ice cream.

Sitting in the parking lot with tapes of Boston and Aerosmith playing, we'd contemplate new flavors of ice cream:

"They ought to make lemon meringue pie flavor, with the crust and all." Theo would say.

"Oh man, what about Indian pudding with Grape Nuts?" I'd throw back.

"For cryin' out loud, that would be genius, Jen!" He's say.

"How did they come up with the name Grape Nuts anyway? No grapes, no nuts. What's up with that?"

On we'd go until neither of us could remember where we started.

Now, I look to Theo and see he isn't the teenager anymore, but a full-on man. I'm not the big-sister-like cousin, showing him the ropes, either. I'm not sure how to be with him until he pulls out a joint and looks to me for an okay.

"Sure," I say and we pass it back and forth as we comb the streets of Sacramento looking for an ice cream place I swear is just around the next corner.

Eventually, we happen upon it. A giant neon ice cream cone sits cock-eyed over the roof, flashing pink and green into the evening air.

"Hey, check this place out. They rank up there with Brown's," I say.

"Bet they don't have Indian pudding!" He says.

They don't, so we order larges in a sampling of California flavors like cookies and cream and mocha java. We eat them in the car just like old times.

Theo rolls a second joint. "Jen-Benjin?" he hands it to me and offers a light.

"Bring it on." I inhale deeply, letting myself forget my age, my plans—my reality.

"Got any Boston?" He thumbs through the cassettes in the center console.

"Nope, I packed light when I came out. How about some Indigo Girls?"

"Are you shittin' me, Jen?" Theo twangs playfully.

*Pop*—the balloon of the past disappears in an instant. There's no salty air, no Indian pudding ice cream, no Nubble Lighthouse in the distance. It's Sacramento and I'm a graduate student in pursuit of becoming a therapist. We are sitting in the Volvo wagon I purchased with the intention of starting a family, not the pea-green smoke-mobile we got for summer cruising after Grandpa Allen died. I look at my watch. "Oh my God! It's already nine-thirty! Doesn't your bus leave in twenty minutes?"

"For cryin' out loud, your right!" He mocks my sudden seriousness. On the drive to the bus station, I drive too slow, leaning into the wheel with shoulders crunched up to my ears.

“Am I going the right way? Isn’t this a one way? Theo, look for a sign, quick, quick!” I’m panicked.

“You’re good, you’re good. Settle down,” he says, bobbing his head to the music.

“That’s it, right there—hold on!” I cut across two lanes, making a semi-u-turn in the middle of a four-lane one-way.

Just when I’m sure I’ve made it, “WhoooKUNCH!” An oncoming truck nabs my side of the car, just missing the door I sit behind. It drags us into the turn, pinning us up against a curb catty-corner to the police station. Flashing blue lights are immediate.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I blink hard, pressing all four window buttons down and grabbed for the gum.

Theo is instantly straight. “Listen, Jen. I’ll clear the weed and bail. I can find the bus from here. I’ll call you later if I miss it. I’ve got to hurry before he sees me. Are you good with that?”

“Yeah, yeah. Go!” I watch him push a full bag of pot through the flap of a garbage can on the corner. He runs into the shadows. I’m on my own. The officer’s flashlight is already blinding me.

“License and registration, Miss.” He’s a white, middle-aged cop with a donut waist. His wrist expertly rotates the light and scans every square inch of the car.

“Where’s your friend?”

“What friend?” If there was ever a time the dumb-blonde thing could work for me, I want this to be it.

“Come on, Miss.” He lowers his voice to a growl. “I don’t have time for this bullshit. Where is your friend? Did he take the marijuana with him?”

“He had to catch a bus. What do you mean, mari—what?” I can’t remember if I’ve already admitted to smoking. Nerves are much worse than drugs for tricking the mind.

We set about a frustrating ping-pong match of Q&A, with me dropping the ball to each question and him being distracted by the other driver who is calling me a “drunk bitch” and the constant crackling of his radio. The cop backs off, looks away and casually says: “Looks like you’re going to get yourself a little visit to jail tonight, Miss-Zero-Cooperation-Pot-Head.”

The lump in my throat is too thick to talk around. I think: *but I can’t, you don’t understand. That’ll end my career path. I don’t have time to start at something else, my husband is sick . . .*

Just then, a woman officer shows up and relieves Big Scary Cop so he can get on with some *real* crimes.

“Look, Ma’am, we got a busy night tonight. I’m going to give this guy your insurance information and we’ll see if you need a tow.” Her tone is matter-of-fact. Even in my stoned paranoid state, I don’t read threat into it. She copies the information on to the back of a card and hands it to the guy who’s still cussing at me from his truck.

“Start it up and pull ahead,” she yells over.

The car screeches, metal on metal, when I edge forward. Though she’s petite and middle-aged, that policewoman walks herself right on over to my fender and gives it a solid tug, bending the contorted metal away from the wheel well. The whole car rocks a little. This woman is my new hero.

“Now try.” The gears grind and the car jerks forward.

“Good. Now, can you get out and walk a line for me?”

The driver door is crunched closed. “It won’t open.”

Her radio scratches the air with urgency. “Forget it. Could you be a little more careful?”

“Um, yeah. Sure.” I answer.

“Drive slow and get some coffee close by. I don’t want to see you again.” She says, waving me off. In my rearview mirror, I notice her tossing a bunch of papers into the same garbage can that holds the incriminating evidence that could kill my future. Up until now, I believed only Tom’s health could take it away.

My hands tremble on the steering wheel as I limp home with the metal fender dragging along the pavement. *Thank You*. Suddenly there’s a God who gives second chances by way of angels dressed as policewomen.

The clock on our bed stand reads 11:46 when I slip between the sheets. Tom is snoring. He’s so cocksure I can handle anything that he never waits up in worry for me. It’s part of his attraction to me. I lay awake, staring up at the constellation of glow-in-the-dark stars we’d stuck to our ceiling, longing for his comfort, but not ready to wake him for it and break his illusion. *Maybe this ‘independent woman’ thing has gone a little too far.*

The next morning I tell him, in full composure, about the close call. At the end of my story I announce I’m back on the wagon. The conversation I’ve started with God continues. *You just watch. I’m coming clean for good. No need to up the ante.*

Tom is fascinated with the story, as if it’s a clever sales pitch for quitting pot. He looks over the proof: the crumpled left quarter of our Volvo and nods.

“Lucky you weren’t hurt,” he says. Funny, getting hurt never crossed my mind.

Perhaps he’s giving my pitch credit for the risk involved or maybe it’s convenient timing. All that matters is that he quits too. Whenever he wants to smoke, he runs instead. It’s part of the training for a marathon he committed to run with my sister, Joyce. A challenging short-term goal, that isn’t *my* idea, is just what he needs to distract him from years of habit.

The best I can do is pray the AA Serenity Prayer that I’ve learned in substance abuse class last semester, never imagining that it would apply to me. I ask for the courage to change what I can, the acceptance of what I can’t change, and the wisdom to know the difference. With that, I return to a meditation practice, work hard in therapy and find us a tiny house to rent in Folsom: home to the state prison. At least there, we’ll know where the bad guys are.

Between semesters, we made our move into a tiny cottage on Scott Street, just blocks from the quaint historic downtown of Folsom, California. Every time I write our return address, I smile at the synchronicity of adding “Scott” just under our names. He was a clever man in life, so it doesn’t surprise me that he’s maintained it in spirit. A white adobe funeral home with a manicured lawn sits across the street from us. I wondered if it, too, is some kind of sign or reminder.

Strangely, I’m comforted watching a black hearse pull up as I wash the Saturday morning dishes. Sometimes I can catch this scene three times in one day. It affirms for me that death is frequent and seemingly objective. *Nothing personal, it happens to us all.*

In the evening, we set out on our walk and take the route Tom has deemed the most prolific upon moving in two months ago. Bouquets of citrus fruits dangle from branches that overhang the street.

“Fair game,” Tom claims, twist-pulling a few lemons off and adds them to our basket. Oranges, lemons, loquats and fennel are plentiful as we make our way down to the musky trail along the majestic American River.

Tom whistles, calling Kizma to us. She’s the shepherd puppy we rescued from the pound at Thanksgiving in hopes of channeling my maternal urges at least until graduation. He throws her a stick and turns to me like a proud papa: “What a sweet pup, huh? We did good with her.”

“We did.” I smile back, reveling in the common delight of our dog/baby. Visions of diapers and infant seats flash in my eyes. To parent with this man is all I can think of lately. It makes concentrating on classes a challenge. Reaching for his hand, I squeeze it. He pulls me close and kisses my forehead. “It’s a good life, huh?”

“Mmmhmm,” I agree, guilty for wanting more.

It’s dark when we made it back to our tiny safe haven. A warm rosemary aroma of soup in the Crock-Pot, welcomes us in. No helicopter lights. Just candlelight. I feel myself exhale, finally.

In February, we head to Wilbur Hot Springs way out in the sticks of wine country, courtesy of my sister, Joyce, who has found herself amidst divorce plans and doesn’t want to waste the romantic getaway fighting. Any remnants of fear left over from living in a bad neighborhood and anticipating cancer’s next move melt away in the burning sulfur tubs. Tom and I cook ourselves until we are sure we’ve boiled out every last drop. When we can take no more, we lift ourselves slowly into the unseasonably crisp air; our steaming bodies shone silver in the moonlight. Dizzying lightness overtakes me, as if I’ve just dropped a hundred pounds of luggage. I can almost fly.

Tom walks ahead into an open field of virgin snow. I watch him and feel the sweetness again; the sure love that hides under the seemingly important stuff of getting by. He motions for me and I join him in the surreal scene.

“C’mon, lets make snow angels for the stars,” he whispers. Lying beside each other, we move our arms and legs back and forth like simple marionettes. A dusting of snow begins to fall. The muffled silence of snow falling reminds me of being out on a winter’s night in Maine, when I was a child. All except for the naked part, that is. Heat from my body melts through the thin white blanket, down to the disintegrating leaves. I can feel them wet and spongy under my back and the thought of becoming soil again one day seems completely natural—even pleasurable.

“I’ll never be cold again,” I say.

“It’s a full moon, and you’re a hot woman, that can only mean one thing,” he says, nudging my shoulder. We rise up carefully leaving behind two perfect imprints of dark angels merged together and wrap ourselves in thick robes as we head back to our room. As we tiptoe through the lantern-lit corridors, Tom rips one of his trumpet farts. He looks accusingly at me. My laugh catches in a snort and I fumble with the room key. Inside our room, we tumble onto the bed giggling. The last of the armor I’ve held in place to protect me from all the worst-case scenarios I’ve scared myself silly with, drops, clearing a path straight to my heart and womb.

*What cancer?*

Over the next few weeks, I dream of kittens and puppies and figure it's because my birthday is approaching—likely a message for me to nurture this inner child I'm learning about in class and in my own therapy. I bring a drawing I've made to session. It's an image that came in a meditation of me sitting cross-legged with colorful chakras aligned and a huge ball of light in my lap. It seems obvious to both Anastasia and me that my second chakra, the one that is all about creativity and sexuality, is waking up in the absence of substances and chronic fear. Something inside me is coming to life.

It dawns on me later that maybe the *something* isn't me. Though I'm only a couple days late, I pick up a pregnancy test at Raley's and stash it in the cupboard until morning, when my urine will be most concentrated with hormones. All night I am buzzing in anticipation, unbeknownst to Tom. As soon as it's light enough to read the directions without turning on the light, I go to the toilet and piss all over my hand trying to capture urine into a tiny tube. The indicator ring at the base is instant and unbroken. Life is officially already growing inside me! No more pondering the decision, it's a done deal, albeit a little earlier than planned. I run into our room and jump on the bed, waking Tom with my elation.

"Button! We're having a baby!"

"Hmmm?" He rubs his eyes and comes-to. "A baby . . . a baby!" He conjures up a smile. It's too late, though. I saw the wince first.

My heart drops from the heavens with a thud. Apparently, he felt the loss of leaving his child within a millisecond of the theoretical becoming reality.

"I thought we decided that you're alive until you're dead?" I remind him.

"Oh, Butterfly," he says lovingly as runs his fingers along my scalp and down to the ends of my hair. He's definitely trying to make things right. "It's great, I can't wait to watch you become a Mamma." He intends reassurance, but I read it as "bail." Whether it's by emotional means or physical means, bail is not part of our deal.

"Tom, this is a *we* thing. I can't wait to watch *you* be a Daddy alongside me," I counter; fear strangling my elation. *Don't think you're going anywhere. You promised twenty years and I'm cashing in, starting now.*

The response I hoped for comes from each of my sisters as I call them. Problem is, I'm not married to them and they won't be parenting this child with me. Tom says all the right things, but I can feel that he is torn. He wants this and he knows it will hurt—and not just him. Meanwhile, all I can think about is what *is*: I'm pregnant.

As I plug on through the literal throws of morning sickness, I realize my adolescent fantasies of being home baking bread, my husband calling from work three times a day to see if the baby has kicked; are just that: fantasies. They get bagged up and pushed to the back, like outgrown clothes. *It's okay; morning sickness would have ruined the smell of freshly baked bread. And, anyway, they need me at work.*

Pretending I don't need anything is familiar protocol. It works until I see how easily Tom buys it. My part of our unspoken deal is about being a low-maintenance cheerleader. His plate is too full with the responsibility of curing his own cancer for any other kind of arrangement.

But then it happens. Somewhere amongst the fatigue, nausea, and foggy headedness, I need—*God damn it!* Mother bear rage comes over me, wreaking havoc with the comfort zone we have so carefully constructed. I demand Tom step up to the plate and make responsible choices for *our* future. The last thing he wants is the restraint

of a parent policing his every move and the last thing I want is to be my husband's parent.

I'm sick of avoiding the bitter part of our relationship for the sake of maintaining comfort. Any attempts to placate me only ignite frustration. Not only do I want to recognize the bitter—I wanted to taste it, digest it, and feel the strength of letting it run through me as I confront its threat. And I want this for *us*.

Resentment has been growing each time I come home to Tom typing away at some story or project that isn't going to pay this month's bills. Most of the time, a heavy "hmpf" goes over his head. This time, I sink my teeth into the bitter.

"Well, lucky you, home all day, while some of us have to work for a living." The words, said with a non-so-subtle sarcastic tone, roll out like marbles from a jar. They've got away from me and I sound like a martyr with an attitude. Not pretty.

"Actually, I'm researching alternative medicines specific to breast cancer for a friend in the support group," he says in monotone without looking up.

*Touché*

"Is that a problem?" he adds.

I try to soften the rough edges of the challenge. "Nope. It's not that. I think it's great that you're providing this service to people, really. Maybe you should get paid for it."

"You know how it is with illness, you can't always work and you don't always have money," he says, typing away.

"You *can* work. In fact, why don't you try a lab job instead of officiating? It's more reliable and not as physically demanding."

"Jen, I *meant* the people I make these packets for. They're under the same stress we are," he says, his voice tight with the threat of losing patience. "I do the work I love, there's no reason to do anything else."

"Well, you know how much I hate waiting tables, but if it's what I have to do, then I do it," I say, hauling him up to the plate, knowing full well the only waitressing I plan on doing is in nightmares. It's not like me to push this hard on him and I can see his shame surfacing.

"It's always more with women. I thought you were different," he says under his breath as he brushes by me.

"*What?*" I'm pissed. "Don't think you can drop something like that and walk away!" He busies himself in the kitchen putting away dishes and avoids looking at me. "Look, Tom, all I'm asking for is some back-up here, not a big house or a new car—that's not me and you know it. You might be bringing in enough to maintain your half of things now, but what happens if I can't do my part when this baby comes? We can't just fly by the seat of our pants anymore, it's irresponsible."

"Jesus, Jen, give me some credit. Why do you think I've been busting myself to get the dental software program off the ground?" He still won't look at me. "It's never enough, is it?"

"Oh, stop. I know you work hard on all your projects. The software is a great idea but it's a pie-in-the-sky payoff. This isn't the time to start a whole new business. Why can't you just do what you know—go back to the lab business. Just pick up something part-time."



“It’s not as simple as that. Besides, I could work for years and not come close to what’s possible with this software. I’m not willing to grind out years in a lab, when I’ve come this far.”

“I’m not asking you to give up of your dreams. I’m asking you to re-prioritize them; that is if me and this baby are part of them,” I say, going straight for the beef of the issue.

“Hmph,” he wags his head in disbelief as if I’ve thrown a punch below the waist. “I’m going out for a walk.”

While he’s gone, I cry in helpless frustration. I’ve never needed like I do now. Whether it’s pregnancy hormones making me into a crazy-woman or I’m finally coming to my senses, I’m not sure. All I know is that life is ratcheting up its seriousness.